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AUTHOR Walker, Don D.
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ABSTRACT

The paper states that the fragmentary character of knowledge makes unified study of a subject such as American Studies an illusion. Two aspects of the interdisciplinary approach are discussed: (1) the failure of subject fields such as American Studies to accept the predicament in which modern scholarship finds itself; and (2) the homogenizing of disciplinary integrities. The predicament is elaborated through comments by a psychologist, an economic historian, and a geographer. These three scholars maintain that as conceptions widen, they tend to become abstracted and lose their concrete particulars and conceptual unity. For example, typical training in American Studies includes a little history, a bit more English, a little anthropology, a cluster of classes in political science, and perhaps a course or so on the history of jazz. Whereas this training is viewed by some as acquiring the discipline of American Studies, it is viewed by others as learning no discipline at all. History is discussed as an example of a discipline which relates to economics and literature, but nonetheless retains a separate and distinct character. In conclusion, the effort to bring disparate disciplines together in the name of American Studies or another interdisciplinary field, blurs important and irreducible differences. (Author/DB)

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American Studies as a Study: The Illusion of Unity

Don D. Walker, University of Utah

If a flying saucer from Mars were to settle down on the flat roof of my academic home at the University of Utah and a distinguished planetary visitor, say a professor with a Ph. D. in Martian Studies, were to observe the goings-on in our terrestial halls, he would be struck by the stir of all sorts of new ideas. He would hear that higher education has become overspecialized. He would note that many departments are recruiting generalists. He would discover that a university-wide committee has been meeting to plan an interdepartmental program in Renaissance Studies. And he might even learn that there is talk of getting up a program in American Studies.

One supposes that the Martian visitor might be well pleased with all this stir of fresh ideas and approaches. He knows that Martian knowledge possesses a high unity, that the educated Martian holds something more than a hodgepodge of learning in his egg-shaped head. Thus he is happy to see that earthly professors -- at least those at the University of Utah -- have found a new reality in higher education. If he listens carefully, he may hear these professors talking about a new set of assumptions; if he watches carefully, he may see some of them sitting comfortably on what they are calling, with a fashionable metaphor, the new philosophical ground of higher learning.

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The Martian's earthly academic friends are of course pleased that he is pleased. Who afterall wants him to fly back home and report that earthly professors, particularly those in the United States, are an unhappy, doubting bunch? Yet some of these friends are nevertheless struck by what they can only call the unreality of the new reality. If they have been around terrestial halls for some time, if they have some sense of academic

history, they will realize that they have heard much of this before. They may even begin to think that history -- at least academic history -- repeats itself. They know at least that little if anything of this new stir is new, excepting of course the bright young administrative faces, the innocent crop of eager assistant professors, the ink still wet on their doctoral diplomas. I don't remember when my department hired its first generalist. It was so long ago that I can give at best an approximate time, a decade if not a year. The first move to begin a Renaissance Program came at least twelve years ago. And for more than a quarter of a century the University of Utah has had a program in American Studies. I was director of the program for about twenty of these twenty-five years. Yet when I resigned two years ago, apparently matters reverted at once to the beginning again. Indeed I was asked by a planning committee to explore possibilities for a graduate program in American Studies, this in spite of the fact that I had already directed such a program for twenty years, this in spite of the fact that the program had already turned out at least two dozen Ph.D.'s with emphasis in American Studies. When I mentioned all of this to the Dean of the Graduate School, he philosophically observed that university administrations rarely have a sense of history, indeed are unlikely to have memories that reach back more than a year or two.

Now I bring up these matters in this way not to criticize my own university, but to suggest that there seems to be an abiding hope that if we can just come at higher education in the right spirit, with the right approaches, we can realize what we have truly known all along, that knowledge is really one. Maybe Henry Adams couldn't find unity; maybe he couldn't truly complete his education; but perhaps we can. Afterall Harvard wasn't a very good university, insulated as it was from the new vital currents of

science and philosophy. Afterall Adams was a dyspeptic doubter who wouldn't have been happy with unity even if he had found it. And besides, we know so much more than Adams could possibly have known.

American Studies, it seems to me, is one academic form of this abiding hope of giving some high unity to the fragmented parts of our knowledge. If it seems content to give this unity to a body of knowledge within a focus upon a limited area called American Civilization or American Studies, it nevertheless supposes that the same sorts of unifying relationships obtain in all knowledge, that indeed it is theoretically possible to have something called World Studies. And the plural here should not be read as a mere collective loosely holding an aggregate of studies together for administrative convenience. If American Studies has kept its plural form, it nevertheless has been dreamed and developed in many universities on the assumption that it is finally a study, that it achieves a unified knowledge of its body of materials.

As my title indicates, I believe this unity to be an illusion, a compelling ideal that may always draw us into new and renewed ventures, but which nevertheless is an illusion. Whatever metaphysicians may decide about the ultimate reality we hope to know, the dream of giving a comprehensive unity to even the limited world of American particulars remains, in my judgment, an illusion. To repeat what I said in reference to the failure of Henry Adams: we know more things than he did. However, in a paradox that Adams' friends Holmes, if not Adams himself, would have enjoyed, the more we know, the less we know it. Yet I am less interested in metaphysics and paradox than in what might be called the practical consequences of our pursuing the illusion of unity. I intend, therefore, to deal with two related matters: our failure in American

Studies to accept the predicament in which modern scholarship finds itself, and the weakening of the disciplinary principles, the homogenizing of disciplinary integrities, as we try to escape from the predicament and fulfill our dreams of unity.

The intellectual predicament can, I believe, be dramatically realized by bringing together three observations published in the past few years. Professor D.C. Coleman concluded his inaugural lecture at Cambridge in October, 1972, by remarking, "I believe that the future lies with a wider and not a narrower conception of the subject [economic history]. And, in that widening, it would be wise to remember Marc Bloch's words that 'in the last analysis it is human consciousness which is the subject-matter of history.'"[1] Last year, in his Herbert Spencer Lecture at Oxford, psychologist Jerome Bruner observed: "The disturbing symptom in our discipline has been its steady loss of conceptual unity. It increasingly consists of a collection of topics-cum-procedures, between which it is ever more difficult to discern workable conceptual connections."[2] And reviewing Geographies of the Mind late last year, Alan R.H. Baker accused the authors of the essays which make up the book of "an apparent philosopical and methodological illiteracy. For there is," he went on, "scant sign of any awareness of the relation of their studies in historical geosophy either to phenomenological philosophy or to idealist and behavioural approaches in history. . . . Unless interdisciplinary links such as these are fully explored. . . studies in historical geosophy will not be -- indeed cannot be -- used cumulatively as building blocks in the constructions of scholarly

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[1]What has happened to Economic History? (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 30.

[2]"Psychology and the Image of Man," The Times Literary Supplement, December 17, 1976, p. 1589.

citadels; they will be momentarily enjoyed but soon forgotten."[3]

Permit me, starting from these observations, to elaborate the predicament further. The future does probably lie, as Coleman suggests, with a wider conception of the subject, not just economic history, but any subject in the whole field of humanistic learning. But when we widen conceptions, we tend to abstract them. The loss in concrete particulars may be a loss we cannot afford if our subject is to continue to signify its most important subject matter. Human consciousness, as Coleman notes quoting Bloch, may be the subject-matter of history. As a concept, it has wide and appealing reach. Indeed, it is an abstraction which as historians we like to name and value. But it is an abstraction, and while we continue to use it, particularly to indicate what finally matters most, we have found more and more historiographical problems in dealing with it. A century ago, in the late heyday of transcendental reason, we accepted it easily, responding to it in works of history, as did the historian, in acts of intuitive faith. Today, we continue to make claims about particular historical consciousnesses, and we may continue to use the singular collective as a term of nominalistic convenience, but the reach of even these limited claims has been narrowed by the squeeze of psychological and epistemological problems. Even a relatively modest abstraction like Bloch's "peasant mentality" may be extremely difficult to validate. In short, as our vision has widened, our sense of particularity has deepened. And if we still look for similarities, our awareness of radical differences has become even more accute.

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[3]"On the Mental Map," The Times Literary Supplement, December 17, 1976, p. 1582.

Even within traditional disciplines, along with the push for wider conceptions, has come, as Bruner notes in psychology, a loss of conceptual unity. It becomes more and more difficult to speak of a study, say the study of history or the study of literature. History has divided not only into the traditional specializations in British and European or American histories and within these larger specializations narrower specializations by selective emphasis upon military or diplomatic or social developments; it has divided by philosophy and methodology. Instead of plain history, we now have history old-Marxist, neo-Marxist, tragic, and old-Whig; we now have psychohistory, Cliometrics, and histories with perhaps other approaches even more newly discovered. It is not exaggerating to say that one historian may not have the faintest notion what his fellow historian in the next departmental office is talking about. When Robert Fogel begins using the tools of retrospective econometrics, say linear programming, Von Neuman-Morgenstern utility indexes, and Markov chains,[4] the mathematical illiterates in his profession must feel as separated as the professor of Chinese from the professor of French. In my own special field, which at one time could be called simply English, there has been a similar division. Even the collective English Studies does not easily hold us together. Any roomful of us will gather not only the traditional specializations in English or American literature and in these larger specializations narrower specializations by period or genre, but also the grammarians, who are by no means a happy little group, the experts in composition, who may now call themselves communicationists, and of course the linguists, who in turn divide themselves into a variety of schools. In any department meeting the linguists are likely to admit that they know nothing about liter-

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[4]See "Historiography and Retrospective Econometrics," History and Theory, IX (No. 3, 1970), 251.

ature, and the old professors are likely to vote approval to linguistic programs on faith, supposing that anybody with a Ph. D. from Princeton or Texas must know what he is doing. On any one day, even when we are supposedly thinking about the matters of our common interest, it is unlikely that our heads are filled with the same kind of concepts.

If within traditional disciplines there is thus the distinct possibility of philosophical and methodological illiteracy, such illiteracy seems almost certain in interdisciplinary studies. Even if the scholar is aware of the need, as Baker points out, to explore interdisciplinary links, he cannot easily do so. It is simply a matter of time. If it takes a full four or five years to become professionally trained in say English or history or sociology, it must take even longer to become professionally trained in all three disciplines. In American Studies we have of course settled for something less than professional proficiency in all of the studies. Take a little history, a bit more English, a little anthropology, a cluster of classes in political science, and finally a dab of something called the history of jazz. The product: a training in American Studies. Some will say that the scholar has acquired the discipline of American Studies; others will say that he has learned no discipline. Some will say that if all of these studies come to any sort of unity, that unity is superficial, in some instances little better than the formal unity of a credit transcript. Others will argue that a broad sense of relationships, even a somewhat superficial sense, is better than no sense at all, better than the burrowed-down isolation of academic specializations.

A moment ago I spoke of our failure to accept the predicament in which modern scholarship finds itself. As one professor deeply involved in American Studies, I am

bothered less by the predicament than by a naive effort to escape it. Sir John Hicks, aware that academic specializations are getting so far apart, suggests that "a major function of economic history. . . is to be a forum where economists and political scientists, lawyers, sociologists, and historians -- historians of events and of ideas and of technologies -- can meet and talk to one another." Personally I would be content to let American Studies be a forum where scholars meet and talk, but this practical unity is obviously much too loose for others. In my university during the past two or three years we have had a try at a new sort of unity, the unity of experience. In the New England Experience and the New Orleans Experience and the River Experience, students have combined pieces of traditional study with travel supposedly to achieve a wholeness of knowing. But however much the students enjoy this sort of venture, the educational unity, if indeed there is a unity, is romantically conceived at best.

There is, as I noted in my introduction, a second consequence in our pursuit of the illusion of unity. While some departmental walls have grown stouter, while within departments specializations have tunneled ever deeper into their own shafts of learning, there have been at the same time good will gestures across the boundaries, one discipline recognizing the wisdom of another, several disciplines seeming to agree that after all they are engaged in the same high endeavor. One must of course appreciate goodwill; one must hope that the community of scholars is indeed a community; but while ecumenical movements may be desirable among religious faiths, the drive for unity among scholarly disciplines may nevertheless be destructive of principles and methods fundamental to those disciplines. There may be, as I put it earlier, a homogenizing of disciplinary integrities.

and Robbins, I believe one can say that remarks of this kind, when used easily and superficially by lesser minds, tend to blur important distinctions between psychology and literature, between history and literature, between literature and other social disciplines.

There is not time here to explore all of these distinctions. Instead let me presume briefly to venture into history as a discipline, with an even briefer look at history where it joins economics, and finally into literary study distinct from its historical aspects.

I do not know how Professor Robinson intended that historians use the modern novel as a source. It is of course possible to suppose that some kinds of novels have a high fidelity in their observational detail. If the novelists are what we call social realists, we may suppose an intention that the thick social environment rendered in the pages of their novels closely match, indeed almost photographically match, the objective world they are seeking to represent. One thinks, for example, of Balzac's account of the boarding house in Pere Goriot, Zola's description of the laundry in L'Assommoir, and Howell's notes on apartments in A Hazard of New Fortunes. One supposes that the social historian might use the evidence from such novelistic observations with confidence. However, these novels are only one kind of novel, and the portions I have pointed to are only parts of this kind of novel. Even earnest works of social realism have imaginative features which would seem to have a dubious historiographical value; they may or may not correspond to anything objective in a historical time and place. And how can the historian use novels like The Sound and the Fury or Mrs. Dalloway or, to push the question to its extreme, Donald Barthelme's Snow White? A novelist friend of mine suggests that the best way to know the spirit of a historical period is to read certain novels: to know the spirit of 18th century England read Tom Jones; to know the spirit

Let me illustrate what I have called goodwill gestures across traditional scholarly boundaries by again quoting three distinguished scholars, three scholars representing three different social sciences, all acknowledging the wisdom of writers in my own field of literature. "The novelist and dramatist," wrote John Dewey in 1922, "are. . . much more illuminating as well as more interesting commentators on conduct than the schematizing psychologist."[5] "Future historical writers," observed James Harvey Robinson in 1930, "when they come to describe our own days will be forced to assign the modern novel a high place in the hierarchy of sources."[6] And finally, economist Lionel Robbins wrote in 1954: "A man will learn more which is relevant to the study of society from the great dramatists and novelists than from a hundred textbooks on psychology -- valuable as these may sometimes be."[7]

As a member of an academic department that is responsible for teaching the high worth of the novel and the drama, as a would-be scholar who has also tried his hand at being a would-be novelist and would-be dramatist, I suppose I should be warmed to glowing by such statements. Add these testimonies to others like them and we obviously have proof of what some of my department peers have long known, namely that the professor of English is truly the world's wisest man. But remember that I am also in American Studies, and thus I am perhaps more unwilling than some of my friends to let literary insight supercede all other forms of truth. Without seeming to reply to Dewey, Robinson,

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[5] Human Nature and Conduct (New York: Modern Library, n.d.; first published in 1922), p. 155.

[6] "The Newer Ways of Historians," American Historical Review, XXXV (January, 1930), 255.

[7] The Economist in the Twentieth Century (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1954), p. 17.

of 19th century Chicago read Sister Carrie; to know the spirit of the fur trade West read The Big Sky. Again, it is a pleasant and appealing notion. What a wonderful way to learn history! But is it not, from the point of view of the discipline of history, also a sloppy notion? Suppose a novel evokes in its reader a sense of something called the spirit of a time (as a literary critic, I find this sense impossible to deal with, but suppose nevertheless), have we any way whatsoever of proving that this spirit is or represents a historical something? Even when the sources come out of the period itself, as historians we have difficulty asserting that taken together the spirits of these individual texts add up to a general spirit. David Lowenthal claims that certain views of the American landscape "are representative not in any statistical sense, but in reflecting the passions and prejudices of leaders generally recognized as speaking for their fellow countrymen at large. The ideas and feelings set forth by these statesmen and men of letters prevailed in the schoolroom, the press, and the pulpit, and profoundly influenced American judgments about the place of the past in the landscape."[8] Alan Baker comments: "At every step in that argument, one is forced to ask 'How do you know? What is your evidence?' But no answers are available."[9] Now if we put these same questions to those who assert that novels reveal the historical spirit, the answers if available are really no answers at all. That is, they don't answer out of a disciplined methodology for answering such questions. Indeed, one has no sense of a discipline at all.

If I turn in further interest to the economist's tribute to dramatists and novelists,

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[8]Quoted by Baker, op. cit., p. 1582.

[9]Loc. cit.

I am equally puzzled about his method for learning social meanings from them. Let me illustrate the problem in a personal way. Suppose as historian I am trying to deal with developments in the cattle industry of the 1880s. These developments are outlined by certain patterns of statistical data, acres put under fence, cattle bought and sold, prices paid and received, etc. However, as economic historian, I want to relate these patterns to the historical persons involved, supposing, whatever the impressive completeness of my numbers, that my real story lies in the economic motivations of the men who worked and sold and bought the cattle. "The way in which the economist develops his hypothesis," writes John Hicks, "is by asking himself the question: 'What should I do if I were in that position?' It is a question that must always be qualified by adding: 'If I were that kind of person.' If I were a mediaeval merchant, or a Greek slave-owner! It is only by getting a feel of what people were like that one can begin to guess."[10] What I thus need is a sense of the cattleman as a person. Can I get this sense from novels? Can I perhaps get a conceptual model from imaginative works which have dealt with the cattle trade? My negative answer is in two parts. I cannot get my model of the historical cattleman from novels because there are relatively few novels which deal with the cattleman in novelistic penetration and fullness. But even if there were a great novel or several great novels, my answer would still be no, for I would need to assume that the greatness of the novel or novels is not necessarily the greatness of historical insight. I would assume that the cattleman of the novel, however much he might owe in initial inspiration to John Iliff, Charles Goodnight and others, is finally a fully imagined

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[10] A Theory of Economic History (Oxford: Clarendon House, 1969), p. 6.

human being who only somewhat incidentally works with cows and whose human meanings are in no way peculiar to the 1880s or the 1930s or any other specific historical time or place.

I started a moment ago with Robbin's view of the value of novels in social study, and now I come back to him, but to a different sort of observation. In another time and in another work, he defended his seeming reluctance to push economics into the arena of social action: "All I contend is that there is much to be said for separating out the different kinds of propositions involved by the different disciplines which are germane to social action, in order that we may know at each step exactly on what grounds we are deciding."[11]

Now while our concern in the area where history and the novel seem to join does not move toward social action, we do nevertheless have the intellectual obligation to separate out the different kinds of propositions involved in writing history and in writing fiction. And this I am afraid we have not always done. On the contrary, in our effort to bring the disciplines of history and literary study together, sometimes in the name of American Studies, we have blurred what seem to me are important and irreducible differences. History "enriched" by imaginative sources has become a specious history; imaginative literature treated as history or sociology or psychology has left us with a specious method of literary criticism.

The problem of keeping the integrity of literary study can, I believe, be illustrated, appropriately for our region, by reference to three well-known novels: The Virginian,

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[11] An Essay on the Nature & Significance of Economic Science (2nd ed.; London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1935), p. ix.

The Log of a Cowboy, and The Hell-Bent Kid. Suppose we are approaching these novels in the context of an interdisciplinary venture called Western Studies, a regional program modeled on American Studies. If we ask, which novel tells us most about the West, the answer will have to be The Log of a Cowboy. Our specific questions might be: which gives us the best geographical report of the Plains country? Which novel gives us the best account of handling cows? Which novel provides the most data in what we might call the sociology of the cowboy? These are the kinds of queries our venture is likely to support. However, this apparent superiority of The Log is really afterall not a literary superiority, for the questions asked are not literary questions; the propositions which might answer them are not literary propositions. The critical truth, I believe, is that The Virginian, although it may not be a reliable guide to western cattle raising, is nevertheless a better novel than The Log.

I am not supposing, in conclusion, that in American Studies or any other interdisciplinary venture we are likely to give up our illusion of unity. Perhaps we need it as a hope to hold us together, not just as a gathering of humanistic scholars sharing some interests but as individual men and women sustained by the conviction that our wholeness as scholars may depend on our belief in the wholeness of our subject. Perhaps we need it as a stay against the threat, described by Gabriel Marcel, that the particular disciplines concerned with "Man's nature' will "dissolve it into an infinite number of different components."[12] Perhaps indeed what I have chosen to call an illusion will turn out not to be an illusion afterall. The hedgehog in my nature says, that will

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[12]The Existential Background of Human Dignity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 18.

be good. However, in the meantime let us remember that the fox has his wise ways too. So if we are going to keep on trying to know one big thing well, let us hope that the parts which make-up this one big thing -- say the studies that make-up an American study -- we can know well too.